

ON A NEW SUBSPECIES OF *PELLORNEUM RUFICEPS* (SWAINSON) IN PENINSULAR INDIA¹

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It has been customary to accept specimens of *Pellorneum ruficeps* (Swainson) from all over Peninsular India, excluding the south-west whence *granti* has been described, as of the nominate form with the type locality in the Nilgiris.

Some years ago while going through the Bombay collection for determination of the subspecies to be included in the *Checklist of the Birds of Maharashtra*, I had noticed that the series collected in the Eastern Ghats by the Vernay Scientific Survey (1929-30) appeared very different from specimens from other parts of India, but in the absence of topotypes no action was possible. The same problem presented itself again when cataloguing the birds in the Bombay collection but I have now been able to give the matter some more attention.

The bird was originally described from India by Swainson, 1832, *Fauna Boreali Americana* p. 487, but Stuart Baker (1921, p. 238) said the type locality was the Nilgiris. Deignan (1947) explained that "many, if not all, the specimens listed by Swainson, in *Fauna Boreali Americana* came into Gould's possession" and "the type specimen is probably the one from the Nilgiri Hills, ex Gould's collection recorded by Bowdler Sharpe, *Catalogue of Birds in British Museum*, Vol. 7, 1883, p. 251." He then restricted the type locality to Coonoor, Nilgiri Hills Dist., Madras Presidency.

Kinnear & Whistler (1930, p. 393) when

reporting on the first lot of birds collected by the Vernay Scientific Survey of the Eastern Ghats referred to five specimens of *Pellorneum ruficeps* obtained at Kurumbapatti, Salem dist., Madras, in the low country about half a mile from the Shevaroy Hills. Here they indicated the type locality as the Nilgiris and said:

"The above series appears to be indistinguishable from Nilgiri birds. Harington originally confined his dark race *granti* to Travancore and we are not certain that the Fauna is right in attributing to it also the birds from Coorg, the Wynaad and South-West Mysore. A fine series of the species is coming in from some of the later collecting camps and it should be possible later on to speak more positively of the distribution of the races of this common bird".

Later when reporting on the whole collection, 1932, *JBNHS* 35, pp. 746-747 they quoted the same source for Swainson's original description but reverted to "India" as the type locality. The series of 36 skins then available from Kurumbapatti, Shevaroy Hills, and northwards along the ghats to Anantgiri, Sankrametta, and Jaipur, in the Vizagapatnam Hills, was said to be remarkably constant in size and coloration though there was a tendency for the coloration to grow slightly richer in tint in the north-east about Orissa, but not sufficient to warrant a subspecies".

This reversion from the Nilgiris to India, the failure to refer to any specific specimens from the Nilgiris (which are scarce in collections) or to compare the Orissa birds with those from other parts of India suggest some

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confusion and the possibility of only the first specimens from Kurumbapatti (actually intermediate between the Nilgiri birds and the new race and once said to be indistinguishable from the Nilgiri birds) being compared with the new arrivals and all being named as nominate *ruficeps*, while the north-eastern birds which are darker and closer to those from the Nilgiri's and other parts of India are said to be different from *ruficeps*, but not separable.

This confusion has led to all the birds from Peninsular India, excluding the dark birds from the south-west (*granti*) being lumped together as *ruficeps*.

A glance at the fair series available from the Shevaroy Hills, Chitteri Range and Palkonda Hills, immediately shows that they are very distinct from all the others available, in having pale upperparts with a faint olive green wash and also a much paler rufous cap. The British Museum have been kind enough to lend me some specimens including one collected by H. R. Baker at Segoor 4000', Nilgiris, and others from the different collecting camps of the Eastern Ghats Survey.

With the examination of even one specimen from the Nilgiris, I have no hesitation in deciding that though those from Kurumbapatti in the low country are intermediate, the others further north along the Eastern Ghats are quite different from *ruficeps* from the Nilgiris and I name them:

Pellorneum ruficeps pallidum subsp. nov.

Type: B.N.H.S. Sp. No. 1259 ♂ (Collector's No. 650) collected by V. S. La Personne at 1000' in Palkonda Hills, South Cuddapah, Madras, on 4th August 1929.

9 cotypes: 7 ♂♂ 2 ♀♀ (all April to August 1929) 1 3500', 1 4000' Shevaroy Hills;

1 2000', 1 3000', Chitteri Range, Salem dist.; 5 1000' Palkonda Hills, South Cuddapah, Madras.

4 specimens from Palkonda and Shevaroy Hills and Chitteri Range from the British Museum all agree with the above. All the specimens, both in Bombay and from Tring, were collected by V. S. La Personne during the Eastern Ghats Survey.

Diagnosis: Olive green of upperparts and chestnut of head strikingly paler than in *ruficeps* from the Nilgiris and further west and north along Western Ghats. A similar character separates *punctatum* from *mandelli* in the north and is referred to as "a greyish cast" by Deignan (1947).

Specimens listed above cover the known range of the subspecies though Bowdler Sharpe (loc. cit.) refers to a specimen from Madras (Dr. Jerdon) in which the general cast of the plumage is ashy and the crown only slightly more rufescent than the back. He also mentions that the superciliary streak is whitish. We do not know how close to Madras this species is now found, but the description is suggestive of this race.

The Spotted Babbler is common in well-wooded localities over most of India, Burma, China, Thailand, and other parts of south-east Asia, and 26 subspecies are listed in Peters' Checklist Vol. X (1964). Deignan (loc. cit., p. 4) "after seeing the variations in the populations in the countries to the east, finds it "difficult to believe that a careful study of good series will not show that in India also considerable subspeciation occurs....."

One good series has been found distinctly different, and I have no doubt that further study will endorse his remarks.

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